

Rainbow colors and rarities and other dollar data

By Roger Boye

Here are answers to several questions about United States dollar bills.

Q — On our vacation, we were impressed with the beautiful money used in Canada. Each denomination is a different color. Will our government ever dump the drab green for something more exciting? — I.P., Rolling Meadows

A — Probably not, because the Treasury Department insists that the uniform color deters counterfeiting. When Americans look at the numbers on a bill to determine its denomination, they also make an inadvertent spot check for bogus money. At least that's the government's theory.

By the way, green and black have been the

dominant colors on almost all U.S. paper money printed since 1861. The most spectacular exception was gold certificates made before 1922; they had a brilliant golden orange reverse side that was symbolic of the gold coins they represented.

Q — I've been getting a lot of worn, dirty \$1 bills in change. Aren't the banks supposed to destroy such crummy money? — T.K., Lincoln

A — Automatic counting machines used at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago and elsewhere remove worn bills, which are then either shredded or burned. A \$1 bill is judged to be "worn out" if it falls limp when held parallel to the ground.

Experts estimate that a \$1 bill circulates for an average of 15 months; most \$5 bills stay in circulation for nearly three years.

Q — My brother says that years ago, U.S. paper money was much larger than it is today. How rare is the old stuff? — J.B., Chicago

A — Before 1929, currency was about 1½ inches longer and ¼ inch wider than bills used today. Uncle Sam reduced the size to save paper and ink, and to make bills easier to use.

Almost all large-size notes are collectors' items; the more common bills go for a little over face value, but some of the rarest varieties sell for thousands of dollars.